

Military training center site contested

By The Associated Press

EASTON, Pa. — A landowner in Clearfield County is charging that the state National Guard passed over his property for a new M-1 tank training center in favor of land owned by a longtime campaign donor to Gov. Ridge and other Republicans, a newspaper has reported.

State officials appear close to finalizing the purchase of 5,000 acres near Clearfield Borough from coal-mining businessman C. Alan Walker, a member of a prominent Republican family that has given Ridge more than \$90,000 since 1993.

But landowner Glyn Powell told The Express-Times of Easton for Sunday's editions that the National Guard officials looked at his property more than two years ago and called it "the best training area for our soldiers and our equipment" in a 1997 memo. They never contacted him after that, he said.

"All I want to see is the government put taxpayer money in the right place," said Powell, owner of Power Operating Co., another coal-mining business in Clearfield County.

The land lies in the district of state Rep. Dan Surra, D-Clearfield, who said the Ridge administration had ignored his requests for public hearings on the training facility.

"It's been like pulling teeth trying to get information," said Surra. He said his constituents want to know what's going to happen.

State officials have indicated that public hearings could drive up the cost of the land and would be held only after the deal has been finalized.

Walker, chief executive of the Bradford Coal Co., called the attacks on the possible land deal "political."

He and his father, Ray, are both members of Ridge's Governor's Club, an exclusive club established after Ridge became governor in 1995 that required a minimum \$25,000 contribution to his re-election campaign in 1998.

Since 1993, the Walker family has

contributed \$90,064 to Ridge, according to Ridge's political action committee, the Ridge Leadership Fund. Ray Walker, 88, once had President George Bush as a house guest, and both Walkers have already contributed to Texas Gov. George W. Bush's presidential campaign, according to Federal Election Commission records.

The Governor's Club has since been replaced by the Governor's Leadership Circle, which requires donors to contribute \$10,000 to the governor's PAC — C. Alan and Ray Walker are both members of the Leadership Circle.

C. Alan Walker said his memberships in the Governor's Club and the Governor's Leadership Circle had nothing to do with the state choosing his land for the tank-training grounds. He said this was the first time he or his father had negotiated with the state for anything.

"It's a coincidence. I know that may be hard for some people to believe," he said. "We don't expect anything in return [for campaign donations]."

"I admire and respect Gov. Ridge," Walker said. "Beyond that, I certainly couldn't get him on the phone and request a one-on-one with him."

Ridge spokesman Tim Reeves said no one in the administration intervened in any way on the decision to buy land for the tank-training grounds.

"It's frustrating to me to have to defend allegations that have no evidence behind them," Reeves said. "We don't do business that way."

Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver said a lack of space at Fort Indiantown Gap limited the National Guard to using only five of the hundreds of M-1 tanks it has at one time. The National Guard also wants to put the site in the western end of the state to help cut down on traveling time for Guard members, Cleaver said.

The deal for the land is likely to be finalized this year, but it could take as long as a decade before the site is ready for use, Cleaver said. Once a deal is reached, the state would have to conduct six months of

environmental tests and ensure that the land, most of which has been degraded by years of deep mining, could support the tanks.

Several buildings also would have to be constructed to store tanks and supplies, and to house personnel. Safety and security issues also would have to be addressed.

The Department of General Services, in charge of acquiring the land, began its search in October 1997 after state lawmakers passed a line item in the capital budget that approved \$8 million to buy land to establish the tank-training base in Western Pennsylvania.

Walker said he showed several sites to National Guard officials. One was a small tract in the southern section of the county, surrounded by land owned by Powell. National Guard officials made four trips to see Powell's land.

A May 31, 1997, memo from Col. Paul Neatour to Col. John VonTrott at Fort Indiantown Gap said Powell's land "meets and in some cases exceeds all of the requirements established."

The memo, also sent to Powell, concluded: "This tract of land should be further studied in detail and seriously considered to be developed as the Western Training Area."

Despite that recommendation, Powell said, he hasn't heard from the state in 18 months.

Powell said he offered the state about 7,000 acres at \$600 an acre, a deal that could have pulled his company out of Chapter 11 bankruptcy and saved 200 jobs.

"This isn't about sour grapes," he said. "I want to see the National Guard come here whether we get the deal or not because it's good for the area."

Cleaver said Powell's land was eliminated after the Guard decided to buy only 5,000 acres and decided that land primarily owned by Walker was more suitable. Although Powell had originally offered 7,000 acres with the possibility of as much as 10,000, he said he made it clear that the National Guard could have picked the acreage it wanted.